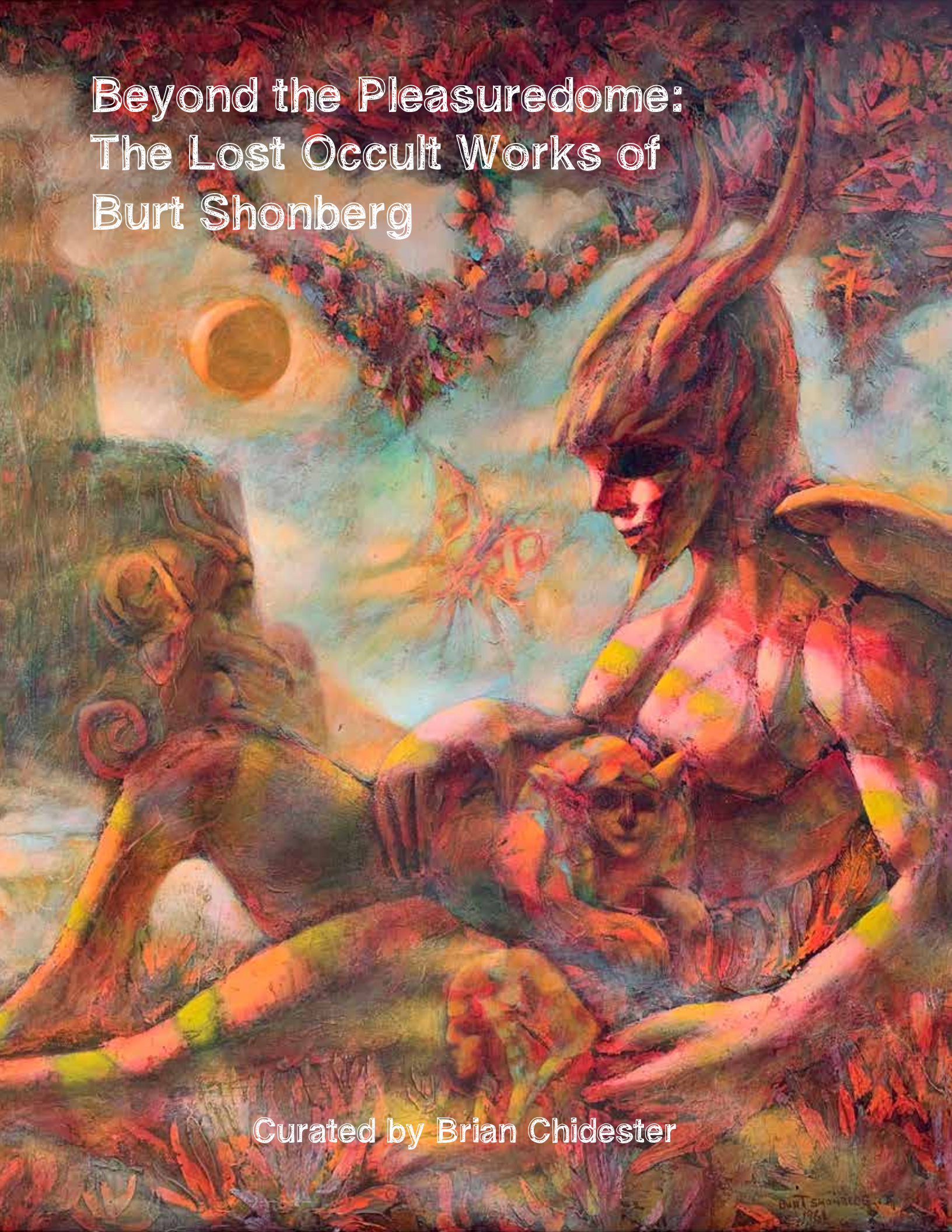
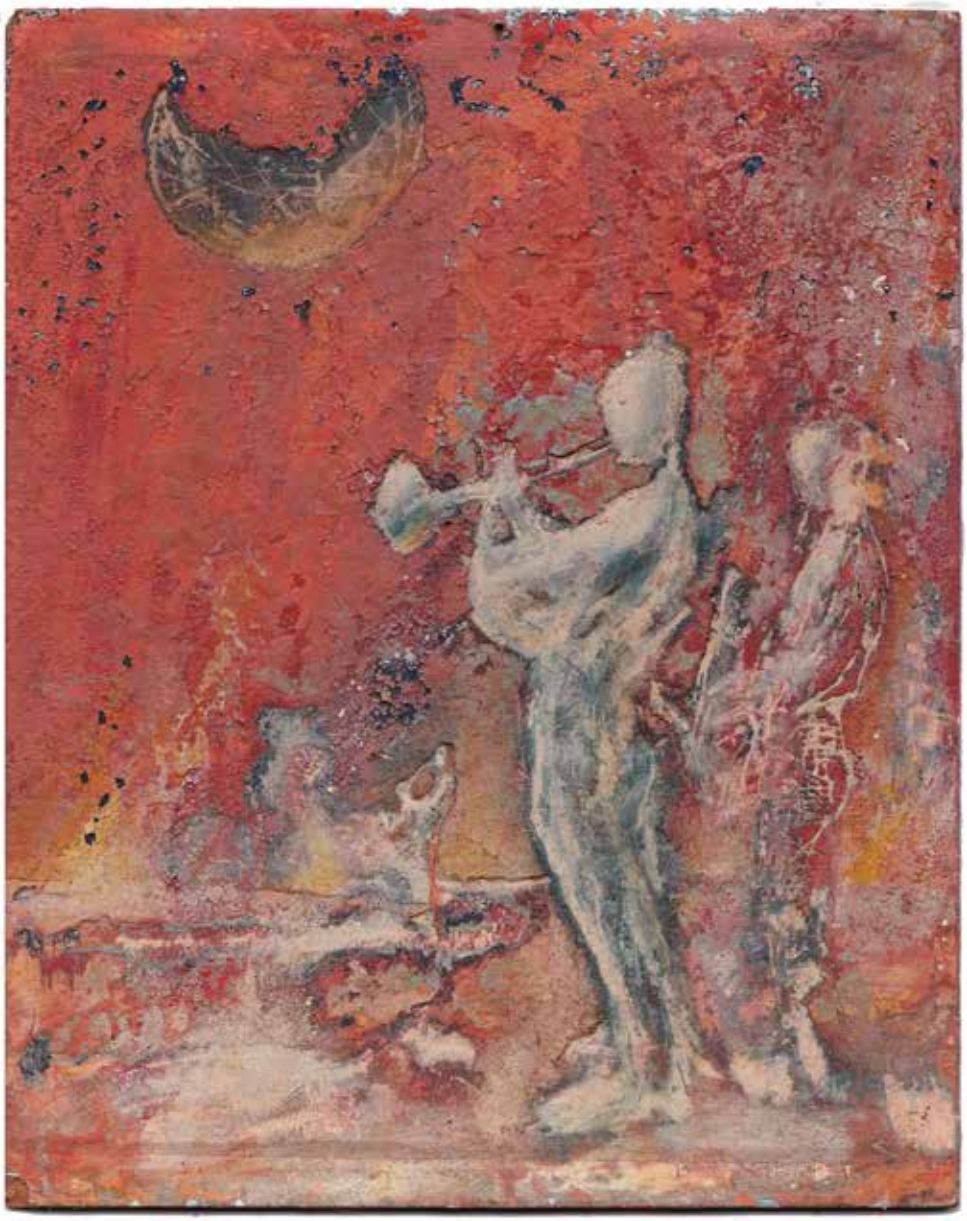
Beyond the Pleasuredome: The Lost Occult Works of Burt Shonberg



Curated by Brian Chidester

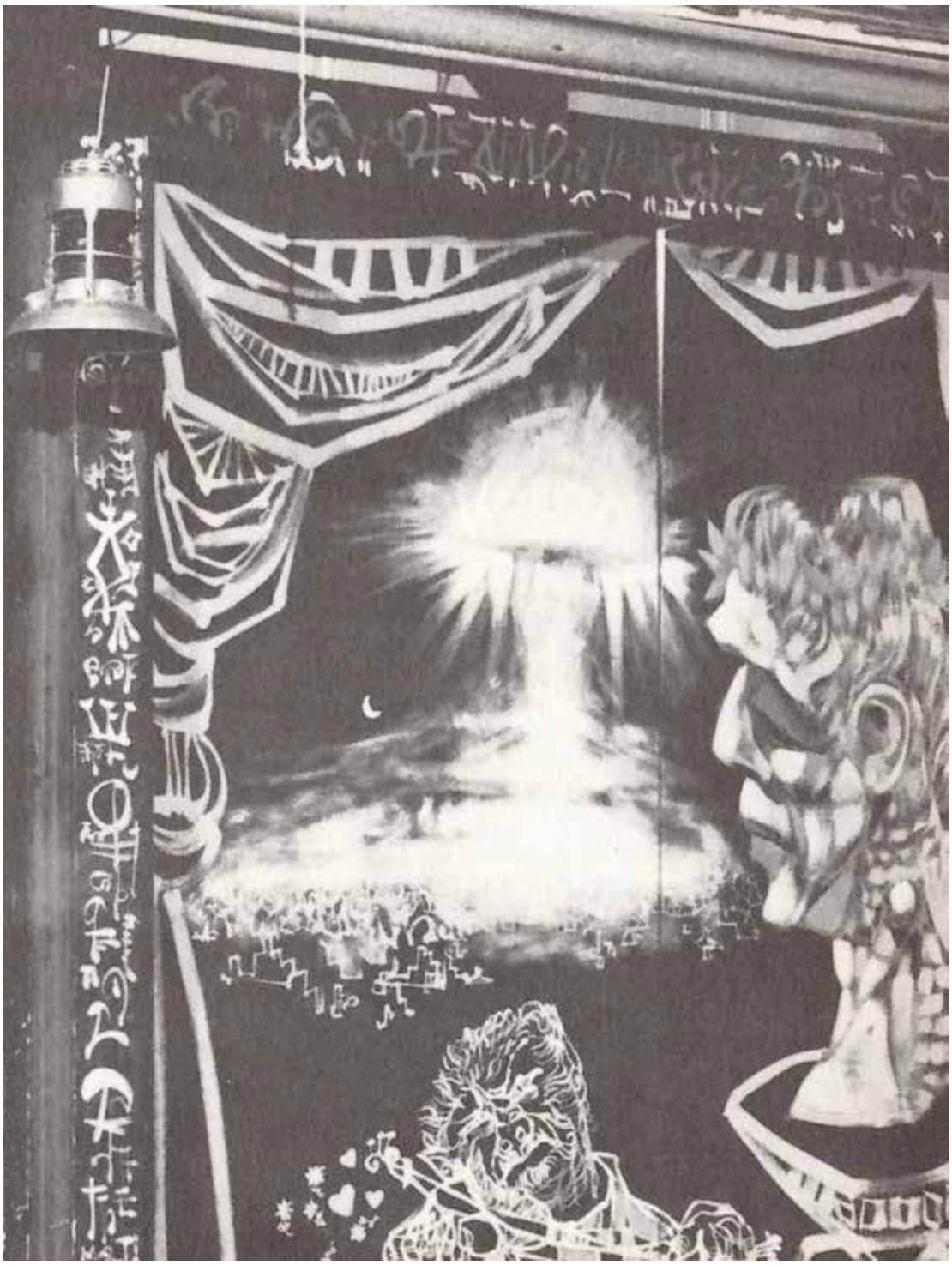
"Title Unknown" (c. 1958-1960), casein on wood, 12" x 5 ½"

Beyond the Pleasuredome: The Lost Occult World of Burt Shonberg



Produced by Stephen Romano Gallery and John Winer

Presented by the Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick



Interior of Cafe Frankenstein, Laguna Beach, California, circa 1958

Director's Foreword

by Steven Intermill

Last year, as we were returning a collection of William Mortensen photos we had borrowed for an exhibit Stephen Romano had curated for the Buckland Museum, we took the opportunity to hang out for a while in my favorite gallery in New York City—Romano's living room—and my friend Matthew Regula spied something of interest and asked about it.

"That's a Burt Shonberg," Romano exclaimed. "You don't know about Burt Shonberg?" Neither Matthew nor I had recognized the name; although I came to realize quickly I had heard an interview about Shonberg on chronicler of the uncanny Erik Davis's "Expanding Mind" podcast.

"He was lovers with Marjorie Cameron," Romano continued, "but an incredible artist on his own. California psychedelic early adopter. His paintings were used in the Vincent Price movie 'House of Usher,' directed by Roger Corman."

"Wow, how did you get a hold of this?," I asked.

"Through one of my contacts," he replied.

"Hopefully there are more coming soon."

Since that fateful day, Shonberg has taken root in my brain, his beautiful creations moving in and making themselves home somewhere near my pineal gland. Then around Beltane of this year, I returned "Apparitions," another show curated by Stephen Romano, and brought along my spouse Jillian. Stephen took the opportunity to share his many treasures with her, and they uncovered one of the Shonberg works I am currently bewitched by—an untitled sometimes referred to as "Magical Landscape: Lucifer in the Garden" (or just "Lucifer," 1961). When I gaze upon it, I see cosmic forms of animism, the idea of every atom in the universe having its own soul and own universe within.

"Let's do a Shonberg show at the Buckland," I asked (practically begged) Stephen. This must have planted a seed. The Buckland Museum of Witchcraft is on a mission of education about esoteric tools and philosophies, but also the occulture and lore of the practitioners, and we are thusly honored to be able to help shed some light on this lost/forgotten explorer of the unknown.

Thank you to Stephen Romano for once again helping manifest more beauty in our museum.

Steven Intermill,
Director of the Buckland Museum of Witchcraft & Magick,
Lammas, 2021

“Title Unknown” (c. 1958-1962), casein on panel, 29” x 30 ½

At Home in Parallel Dimensions (An Introduction)

by Robert Cozzolino

The art world presents as a creative community that strives for an open and inclusive culture. Yet it suffers from forces within that police it in order to reinforce hierarchies, maintain systems of privilege, and denigrate certain subjects or styles. This surveillance affects the market (which is often complicit with nefarious intensions), causes pressure on collecting patterns, approves or rejects academic topics, and of course, green lights exhibitions. It takes a great deal of self-confidence and, paradoxically, humility, to work counter to these forces. You need collaborators, and there is strength in that community. It is the way change happens.

The artists who are championed makers (slapped with the label "outsiders"), who had worked apart from the art world's mechanisms, had the empathy and eyes to identify kinship and understand meaningful worldviews. Among the art world's authorities, these artists were and are still separated; labelled "primitives," "naïfs," "outliers." Art history loves to separate and label, pit artists against one another, and declare winners. It rarely knows what to do with what cannot be quantified or fit into an existing taxonomy.

But artists do not work in a vacuum. Not even those who we are told kept to themselves, had no formal training, lived with mental illness, or faced other challenges that led society to marginalize them. There is always a connection, and where there are connections and inspiration, there are others across disciplines that share the underlying impulses and vision. If you are reading the name Burt Shonberg or viewing his luminous work for the first time, know that this is no outlier. His interests, i.e. what he cared about or sought, have long contained underground threads within the lives of forgotten creative people; and in his immediate circle there were sparks and pathways that led in multiple directions and to people you probably know (or recognize by name).

There is intention to Shonberg's vision and a community that supported it and shared in its possibilities. If it is hard to understand, it is because our eyes and frame of reference has been honed to a specific image of what art should be —what is acceptable, what is tasteful, and how artists should act. Look away from that and there is a multitude of alternatives to which audiences today demand access. They want to know how artists opened up new doors and what it looks like through those portals. It is not surprising to me that Shonberg had an L.A. connection. That city's culture for many generations supported artists who rejected what the world declared was important in art. They followed their gut and their inner eye, and found an audience that demanded these qualities in their creative people.

What does it look like or mean when an artist strives to show their audience the feel and look of expanded consciousness? Of another world they have seen and been absorbed into? Is it even possible with the material tools of paint? Shonberg attempted just that, and the results transport the viewer, rhyme with the work of mediums and those who practiced astral projection, are at home in parallel dimensions to be visited in trips. He came close to presenting what that feels like with the modest tools at hand. And isn't that what we want of artists? To collaborate with us to shift consciousness and to transport us out of the mundane reality that we face here and now?

There is the suggestion in these new worlds that we have the power to change what we know is toxic on ours. That Shonberg's work is reappearing at this moment may feel in part that it is part of a zeitgeist. It has been long clear that status-quo or mainstream ways of operating in the world have been miserable failures that do not integrate humanity, ecology, and equity. If the urgent evidence that we need to change—not just in consciousness but in action and devotion—is not abundantly obvious from the violence of racism, destruction from a warming world, and illness signaling imbalance with nature, then we truly are doomed. Perhaps the artists who matter most are those who were in tune with other worlds, saw beyond the tangible environment, and had ideas for greater consciousness; artists who met with perplexed or indifferent reactions from their contemporaries, but who need people today who believe in them, despite the odds against their finding a wider audience.

Empathetic folks with passion and courage, but also with an eye, are few and far between. In the folks who are presenting this exhibition, we have them.

Robert Cozzolino,
Patrick and Aimee Butler Curator of Paintings, Minneapolis Institute of Art

Burt Shoberg and his paintings, with Vincent Price and Roger Corman, on the set of “The House of Usher”

Like Turner on Acid: A Brief Memoir of Burt Shonberg

by Roger Corman

Burt Shonberg first came to my attention in the late 1950s. By this point he was already the preeminent psychedelic artist of Los Angeles; was at the forefront of new approaches to painting, influencing a style that would come to define an entire era; and his use of psychedelic colors, combined with surrealistic compositions, resulted in unusual but highly arresting paintings and murals.

As the 1950s Beat movement that thrived in coffeehouses and clubs transitioned to the psychedelia of the '60s, Burt's work inspired many admirers. He was frequently commissioned to paint murals outside the hip establishments along the Sunset Strip (and elsewhere around town) as well as to provide art for the interiors. This was a uniquely exciting time and place to be an artist, with poets influencing painters influencing musicians influencing filmmakers, and psychedelic drugs unlocking new doors to many of the most creative minds of the time.

When I met Burt I was embarking on a new chapter in my own artistic development. I had just made a deal with American International Pictures to produce and direct an adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Fall of the House of Usher." I didn't know it yet but this was to be the first of eight film adaptations that would come to be known as my "Poe cycle." Prior to this first Poe picture, I had already made many movies, usually working with black and white film, and on extremely low budgets. My ambitions were greater with "House of Usher" as I hoped to capture the literary Gothic horror of Poe in vibrant color.

As two artists moving into new modes of expression in our work, our introduction was fortuitous. While Burt's paintings and murals hung in cafes around Los Angeles, he also had his own spot, the Café Frankenstein in Laguna Beach, and his preoccupation with monsters, aliens, the occult, and other horror elements in his art resonated with me. Most importantly, I could see he was a major talent, exploring new ground in form and color. I knew right away that Burt's artistic sensibilities would lend much to my new film, thus I hired him to create the portraits of the Usher family that adorned the Gothic mansion occupied by Vincent Price's character in "House of Usher."

Burt's work had a mystical, mysterious quality, and was perfect for capturing the evil inherent in the faces of the Usher family ancestors. I provided him with character histories and let his imagination roam free. In his depiction of Vivien Usher, a murderess who died in a madhouse, Burt painted a terrifying image of a woman with blacked out eyes in a haunting color scheme reminiscent of Picasso's blue period. For Bernard Usher, a jewel thief and drug addict, Burt painted a portrait that seemed to mimic an element of double exposure photography but in a fiery psychedelic red that seemed to burn through the canvas like a Turner on acid. He captured the tormented spirits of the entire Usher family, as well as the spirit of the entire film, perfectly. Together, we came up with one of the most unique and memorable uses of painting as a storytelling device in film, a manifestation of the subconscious malevolence lurking within Roderick Usher.

A few years later, I was lucky to work with Burt again on a subsequent Poe picture, "The Premature Burial." Like many other artists in Southern California in the 1960s, crossing paths with Burt altered my artistic consciousness. He was a one of a kind visionary and my collaboration with him remains one of my most treasured experiences.

Roger Corman,
July 2021

6001-30

6001-55

6001-70

“Title Unknown” (1954), watercolor on paper, 14” x 20”

Beyond the Pleasuredome:
The Lost Occult World of Burt Shonberg

by Brian Chidester

That the art of Burt Shonberg was considered anachronistic in the era it was created makes perfect sense. He was a man out of time—both ahead and behind.

Stylistically, the works he created during the 1950s and '60s harkened back to earlier modern art genres, including Cubism and Surrealism, and thus lagged in the periods of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. He was ahead, however, in that his art infused these older modes with an esoteric aspect which became commonplace in California only a decade after his initial breakthrough. Indeed, during Shonberg's lifetime, there was exactly one public exhibition of his art—at the Gallery Contemporary in West Hollywood in 1967—and no works were apparently sold. The question of how he escaped notice by nearly everyone is thus what this exhibition seeks to redress.

At least six notable creative types were associated with Shonberg around the time he created the pieces exhibited here—roughly 1954-64—and they constituted a creative circle which itself has only recently begun to be understood. These include: Forrest J. Ackerman, Marjorie Cameron, Elizabeth Case, Roger Corman, George Clayton Johnson, and Valerie Porter.

Johnson, from whose collection the bulk of the work here originates, was involved with Shonberg beginning around 1958—in an enterprise the two dubbed Cafe Frankenstein. It was a beatnik coffeehouse in Laguna Beach, CA, which Johnson and Shonberg co-owned, and which brought together a number of interests the two budding artists shared.

Johnson was an aspiring novelist and screenwriter and would go on to write the classic futuristic novel “Logan's Run” (1967) as well as beloved episodes of “Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” “The Twilight Zone,” and the original “Star Trek” series. Shonberg was primarily an illustrator during the mid-1950s—of images for space-age album covers, and of science fiction, UFO, and pinup magazines; and also for the new cult publication “Famous Monsters of Filmland.” The latter was the brainchild of Forrey Ackerman—occultist, life-long nudist, and the inventor of the term “sci-fi”—who also served as a manager of sorts for Shonberg beginning around 1957.

It was Ackerman, in fact, who was likely the conduit for many of Shonberg's creative colleagues, including Johnson, and who supplied Shonberg with an abundance of early subjects of interest. (Ackerman maintained one of the largest collections of early horror and sci-fi movie memorabilia in the world until the time of his death in 2008, including original masks, props, and ephemera related to the 1931 Universal Studios version of “Frankenstein,” starring Boris Karloff, from which Shonberg based his mural paintings inside the Cafe Frankenstein.)

Around the same time, Shonberg was introduced to two women who pushed his art deeper into phantasmagoria, and into arcane subject-matter. The first was the aforementioned Elizabeth Case. She worked in the 1950s as an animator at Disney Studios—on such films as “Sleeping Beauty” (1959)—and was also a poet and someone who hung around the beatnik haunts of Greater Los Angeles. Case and Shonberg may've briefly been lovers around 1957-58 despite the fact that she was married then and raising two kids. She also hired him to create illustrations for her Beat-influenced, anti-nuke fable, “Pax & Dig,” published in '58; and her own artistic style—a mix of abstract, vegetative forms that lived somewhere between the organic, the macabre, and the geometric—seems to have cross-pollinated with Shonberg's in its general form and approach.

The other female artist with whom Shonberg was acquainted at this time was Marjorie Cameron—and her influence upon him cannot be understated. Cameron was, besides being a single-minded painter, also a deadly serious witch practitioner and occultist. Her notoriety in Hollywood during the postwar era, in fact, was the stuff of legend.

She was married to Jack Parsons, chemist, inventor of rocket-fuel technology, founder of the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, and devotee of Aleister Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO). The two met in 1946 and by all reports had a tempestuous six year relationship based in spiritual radicalism, sex magick, and infidelity. Before his death in 1952—from an accidental chemical explosion in his home laboratory—Parsons believed Cameron to be the actual Scarlet Woman of Crowley's mythos (as written about in the latter's “The Vision and the Voice,” 1911, and in an

OTO ritual known as Liber V Vel Reguli). The couple even set out to give birth to the titular figure of Crowley's 1917 novel “Moonchild” (otherwise known as the Son of Babylon or the Antichrist).

Cameron was later cast to play the Scarlet Woman by Kenneth Anger in his 1956 magnum opus, “Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome,” and Shonberg, in a number of his paintings c. 1958-59, depicts what clearly looks to be the Scarlet Woman in all her enigmatic glory. In one particular work the artist renders a haunted nude female who is breast feeding an infant. Its bold, ham-fisted strokes and angular cross-hatches are done in the tradition of German Expressionist painting of the earlier 20th century, albeit Shonberg takes the genre out of the realm of social realism completely, setting his two figures instead in a monochromatic landscape of scarlet flavors and ominous hues. The moon, a persistent presence in his work of this period, is of the deepest burgundy, and suggests a symbolic focal point (or overt reference to witchcraft or Wicca). The female figure also appears to have hooves for feet.

A second Scarlet Woman painting—dated 10/59 and inscribed “For My Friend George” (one assumes Clayton Johnson)—again boasts a nude female bathed in crimson light; though this time the underlying shade is one of a sinister nighttime blue. Her back is turned as she faces a blood-red crescent moon in the distance and sits atop what appears to be a row of uneven spikes. The tone is eerie and apocalyptic and unlike almost anything in the canon of modernist styles one might presume Shonberg to have pastiched.

By 1958, when he and Cameron met (and began their one year love affair), her notoriety as a creative provocateur doubtless preceded her. A drawing she'd made a few years prior, entitled “Peyote Vision,” was included in artist/local avatar Wallace Berman's debut show “Temple” at the Ferus Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard (in West Hollywood). He had already featured Cameron on the cover of issue #1 of his “Semina” magazine, and published a few of her poems inside; yet for displaying “Peyote” in his exhibition—a drawing which depicted an ecstatic female figure with slithery, bifurcated tongue being mounted from behind by a faceless humanoid—Berman was hand-cuffed and made to stand trial.

In terms of Shonberg, the faceless humanoid of Cameron's “Peyote” featured prominently in his work from this period, and may in fact point to an influence which sprung from the couple's romantic liaison. A small painting on wood titled “Where=Who?” in the exhibition is exemplary. It showcases his take on this cryptic figural type, a persistent presence also in the earlier canon of Surrealist Giorgio De Chirico, who doubtless influenced both Cameron and Shonberg (and countless other midcentury artists). Where Shonberg's small painting differs, however, is in the way he economically places his landscape inside the faceless outline of the humanoid's head rather than on the outside where time and space can overwhelm him. The artist also featured this figure in a more prototypically Surrealist painting titled “Who Am I? No Thing. Here. Now.” (1961), which he sold to a young actor friend named Stanley Dyrector then, and in countless other paintings and drawings of the period (including several illustrations he produced for sci-fi magazines in the early sixties).

Yet another painting in this exhibition with a possible Cameron reference is an untitled work portraying the face of a female figure, heavily distorted, staring out at the viewer. It is signed “Shonberg 1958,” and in the top-right features the outline of a crescent moon, here backed by a blood-red sun, the symbol of feminine/masculine union in alchemical tradition. Given the time in which it was created, plus these obvious symbols, it is no stretch to think it might in fact be a portrait of the artist's lover. What seems more likely, however, is that the painting depicts the Frankenstein bride of the 1935 Universal film, as according to George Clayton Johnson it hung inside the Cafe Frankenstein, thus making its weird combination of Impressionism and Cubist technique for the figure's sutured skin a kind of missing link between modern art and gothic horror which had gone undetected until Shonberg put them together on canvas.

It is also possible as well to see these images of Shonberg and Cameron from 1958-59 as a visual catalog of Crowley's various cosmologies. What is uncertain is how deeply Shonberg got into Crowley, or into the occult in general, and of the two, Cameron's work has the definite feeling of being more doctrinaire, with many of her figures being rendered in the style of Art Nouveau costume books or narrative set designs for fantasy-laden operas (albeit more dark in tone). Shonberg's, by turn, have the feel of being created more by osmosis, and of unfolding without much in the way of orthodoxy to guide them.

His “Magical Landscape: Lucifer in the Garden” (1961), for example, portrays the titular character lounging beneath a tree in a manner untethered to any known narrative or traditional depiction of this figure in art history. It also features Shonberg's signature solar/lunar combo off in the distance; and a dream-like arcadia in which fairy creatures flit around in a state of half-opacity. Lucifer's skin is patterned in stripes, ala the clothing of folkloric figures like the

Pied Piper of Hamelin, and he bears the same hollow, expressionist eyes as the Scarlet Woman in the artist's earlier paintings. He also caresses two small sphinx-like figures in his lap, and has perched upon his knee a homunculus, or miniature version of himself (another reference to alchemy).

On the verso of the canvas, oddly enough, is another painting, this one left in half-finished state. It boasts a larger sphinx character which takes up half the picture and features the headdress of a Native American—or perhaps a Roman solider (it's difficult to tell). Elsewhere in Shonberg's oeuvre of this period such sphinxes proliferate. In one, dated 1961, the sphinx looks like a sculpture rendered in paint, its geometric angles and palette-knife incisions giving off the sense of hardness. Its compositional space is, by contrast, atmospheric and sparse, with the entire picture being covered in wisps of white paint and near-transparent glazes.

A second sphinx painting depicts what seems a more obviously female figure. She is bathed once again in washes of maroon and orange, ala Shonberg's Scarlet Woman paintings, and with yet another moon of the deepest crimson hovering at the top-left. (Indeed, the lack of solar or sun presence here, an occult symbol for masculinity, more or less confirms it as a female-focused image.) Her body, unlike the previous sphinx, is fluid and somewhat translucent (rather than hard or sculptural), and is as though minerals and other elemental forms flow through her (and in a sense conjure her from another world into our own). In terms of technique, the painting hues closer than any of the artist's works in this era to the sinewy, ethereal figures of Cameron's paintings and drawings as seen in the short bio-documentary, *The Wormwood Star* (1958), and almost certainly references her presence in and influence upon his life in some way. (There even seems to be a portal, shaped like a vulva, on the sphinx's breast plate.)

A final sphinx painting in this exhibition (or perhaps a gargoyle of sorts?) is amongst the most mysterious of all works in the Shonberg canon. It is dated 1960 and is deceptively simple at first glance. A central figure is once more rendered in solid form, painted as though it is carved in stone, its body robust and smooth. A headdress from Egyptian tradition rests upon its forehead and behind its ears (and is topped by a Roman-style soldier's plume). Such hybridity of Mediterranean and Eastern forms was common to occult iconography of the early-to-mid-20th century. The figure's wings are turned up and feature the artist's signature decorative lines; and there is a glowing blue oval shape on its rip cage. The picture also hosts a pair of mysterious structures situated on an otherwise desolate gray landscape. They bear the imprint of both stone-mason architecture and organic plant forms, and in fact Shonberg may've rendered them in a generative, action-painting technique (as opposed to them being pre-planned). But then at this point the entire image is an almost indecipherable dark vision.

How therefore is one to read this? Has the artist somehow transported the viewer to a parallel landscape other than the one we consider everyday reality? In what period is this supposed to be set? And in what world? It is certainly atmospheric; yet not particularly warm or inviting. The figure of lore is foregrounded, almost menacingly so, like a gatekeeper. Is he alive? Or is this a relic from some forgotten subculture? And what about those structures? Did they spring from the ground? Were they built by someone in this world? And why is the rest of the landscape so barren? Could the artist have caught a glimpse of the cosmos in its metaphysical essence? And might these organic forms thus be some sort of infected growths translated as geometric structures? Did Shonberg imagine this as part of his occult practice? Or did it emanate from his brain via the spontaneous creative act? And if the latter then what kind of world was he living in exactly?

The simple answer is—one pushed to the very edge of his psyche. Indeed, it is no stretch, given what we know of his associations at that time, to think of his oeuvre as a type of mystic ecosystem, a playful underworld of Hollywood in the 1950s, chock full of cosmic figures and taboo-breaking experiences.

Whatever the case—by 1959 Cameron and Shonberg had split up. She moved on to her first feature-length acting role—in the film “Night Tide,” starring Dennis Hopper and Linda Lawson as leads, with Cameron herself cast as the “Sea Witch.” Whether she had made any attempt before their breakup to introduce Shonberg to her confreres at the Ferus Gallery, then the epicenter of contemporary art in L.A., is not known. One assumes she did and that the gatekeepers of taste decided to reject him. According to Marshall Berle (a later friend of the artist), Cameron also tried to persuade him to ritualistically burn all of his paintings, which may or may not have happened. Certainly the ones he gave to George Clayton Johnson survived (as evidenced by this exhibition).

It is worth noting, however, that besides Cameron, Case, and Johnson, the artist also associated with other movie industry people, including future screenwriter of the “Blade Runner” series Hampton Fancher, then a regular actor in TV Westerns (and Shonberg's roommate for a spell). The artist's partnership with manager Forrey Ackerman was also still fertile enough in terms of gig work to land solicitations from low-budget film productions, including Roger

"Title Unknown (The Bride of Frankenstein)" (1958), casein on panel, 17 ½" x 9 ½"

Corman's “House of Usher” (1960), starring Vincent Price (based in the Edgar Allan Poe short story of 1839). This once again rooted Shonberg in the illustrative and vernacular as the paintings he created for “Usher” were all of deceased fictional relatives who haunt the titular location and act as horror objects which keep visitors to the house under constant surveillance. For Shonberg, however, they also emanated from the same palette and technique as his most mature works of 1958-61.

The blank eyes of the “Usher” paintings, for example, and spectral faces of the figures, are once again rooted in the artist's take on German Expressionism, albeit with a freer painterly aspect in the hair and backgrounds that is indicative of Abstract Expressionism, then still the vanguard of midcentury art. Yet Shonberg was no mere appropriator—which is to say, his splashy, textural additions were never just about surfaces or materials, i.e. the focus of Abstract Expressionism in New York City (as least as far as culture critic Clement Greenberg was concerned), but more about using paint in the service of the visionary, or as a means of crossing from one state of consciousness to the next.

There is an untitled work, dated 3-4-59, which is associated in technique to the “House of Usher” paintings. It is non-narrative, as in AbEx, which sets it apart from his mainly figural works; yet it is also persistently space-conscious rather than surface-oriented, and indeed may be a case of Shonberg having placed his skeins of paint inside a physical landscape so as to be made capable of transforming into something recognizable. The materialization process within his imagery, in fact, may be the point on which his cosmology in the 1960s comes together.

Indeed, around the same time as his work on “Usher,” the artist agreed to partake in an experiment overseen by psychologist Dr. Oscar Janiger on the effects of LSD-25 upon the creative mind. Shonberg, by his own admission, had had a hallucinogenic experience as early as 1957, and had likely been exposed to peyote, via Cameron, a year or so later. It was only in 1960, however, that he documented his early psychedelic experiences—primarily in a hand-drawn comic strip titled “Out Here” (a manuscript which has seemingly been lost as of this writing)—and began the process of integrating his various interests into a language of artistic mysticism. The visionary approach, in fact, is the one Shonberg was entirely focused on when he met the sculptor Valerie Porter in 1962-63 and decided to follow her to Ibiza to live and make art together, and for Porter at least, to meet other artists. In time, she became the new muse of Pablo Picasso, staying on after Shonberg returned to L.A. in '64. Before he left, however, Porter apparently introduced him to his hero, Salvador Dali, and Dali is said to've either given Shonberg a painting or given him opinions about his work (both possibly apocryphal).

Back in L.A., he began several new paintings under the influence of peyote, a series which was to become something of an apotheosis for him artistically. A single work from the series appears in this exhibition—a medium-sized painting of tertiary blues and other soft colors. It features the artist's abstract technique of criss-crossed brushstrokes and palette knife incisions. At the bottom is a gravel hill, inclined to the right, with a brilliant sky in the background. Its delicate hue is light-filled yet unmistakably nighttime. At the top-center is a brilliant explosion of off-whites and indigos, replete with hints of pale pink, purple, and ochre. The shape, if we can even call it that, is wonderfully expressionist—and abstract—and embodied—like an energy field manifesting itself from chaos into physical mass.

Several other works in this period feature a similar color palette and host faceless humanoids seated on hillsides (or lying in bed hallucinating). Their bodies are luminescent and open from within onto unseen worlds and spiritual portals. A second composition, rendered similar to the painting described above, was titled “Aztec Vision” (1965), and also boasted exploding abstract forms at top-center, albeit this time the face of an Indian chief materialized there, hovering like an apogee of cosmic consciousness. The artist would display this and other large- and medium-scale artworks from the period in his lone exhibition of 1967 in West Hollywood; yet in the era of Minimalism, Pop, and Conceptual Art, he had become more obsolete than ever.

Indeed, over the next ten years, until his passing in 1977 (age 44), Shonberg remained as forgotten in life as he would be in death. There was an apparent psychic break some time in the early '70s—perhaps brought on by the art world's rejection; or by too many acid trips. It was captured in the inscrutable drawings he made on napkins; or discarded sheet music; or any surface he could find. His identity became increasingly dissociated, and he was known to tell friends that he was inhabited in his body by an alien named Jack Bond, intergalactic agent from the Time Coast, Fourth Dimension—a moniker the artist embedded in his works with increasing alacrity.

In the end, we can try to understand Shonberg through our critical faculties, but only if we first acknowledge it is we

who need them, not him. He spoke the language of occult in his paintings and drawings—though not in the sense of alternative or arcane spirituality, but rather in the truest sense of the word, meaning *secret*. In that way, we would do well to engage them without trying to rationalize their meaning too much, but instead to indulge in the radical freedom from homogeneity they offer. They remind us also that the journey to wisdom and truth is a danger-filled one; and that it must ultimately be taken alone.

“Title Unknown (Peyote Vision)” (1965), casein on panel, 9” x 20”

“In the year 1957, in Los Angeles, California, I had my first dramatic experiences beyond the limits of so- called ordinary, everyday consciousness...

“Every day, for seven years straight, I was hit by a number of widely-separated, momentary blasts of unexpected light.

“Since this time, via various methods, I have experienced a considerable number of altered states of consciousness. Amongst the methods employed to accomplish this was the use of what are termed psychedelic (mind-manifesting) substances. In 1960 I worked with a research project under the direction of a Los Angeles psychiatrist, Dr. Oscar Janiger, who was studying the effects of LSD-25 on the creative process. My participation in the project was that I had to do paintings under the influence of LSD-25. I came to realize that the significance of art resulting from the psychedelic experience could possibly reach to actual magic and beyond. Also, very interesting discoveries might be communicated through art by capable creative minds that are familiar with the experience, and these discoveries could come through any existing form of art.

“There are, of course, certain things that one experiences in the transcendental state that are not possible to communicate in the usual way, so new types of parables would have to be created to get the message through. These discoveries I refer to could be insights or revelations into various aspects of the world we live in, nature, the mind itself, time, the universe, reality and God.”

—Burt Shonberg, excerpted from “Out Here: A Brief Account of How This All Began for Me”

“Title Unknown (Frankenstein’s Castle)” (1957), ink on paper, 18 ½ x 29”

Timeline

March 30, 1933 – Burt Shonberg is born in Revere, MA.

1950-52 – Attends the Boston Institute of Fine Arts for two years.

1953-55 – Army service. Paints murals in the mess halls and some early drawings and watercolors in the Surrealist style.

1956 – Moves to California and continues studies at the Los Angeles Art Center. Meets sci-fi/ horror movie memorabilia collector (and publisher of "Famous Monsters of Filmland" magazine) Forrest J. Ackerman (who becomes his agent/manager).

1957 – Meets George Clayton Johnson (later writer of "Logan's Run" and episodes of "Star Trek" and "The Twilight Zone") and has first hallucinatory experience.

1958 – Begins relationship with artist/occultist Marjorie Cameron. Possible exposure to peyote through her. Also opens the Cafe Frankenstein, a beatnik coffeehouse in Laguna Beach, CA, with Johnson and Doug Myres.

1959 – Ends relationship with Cameron.

1960 – Sells Cafe Frankenstein to Michael Schley and Connie Vining. Begins collaboration with Roger Corman and art director Daniel Haller on "The House of Usher" film. Later enlists in LSD experiments of Dr. Oscar Janiger at University of California Irvine.

1961 – Continues own experiments with acid and peyote which leads to invention of Psychedelic Art genre.

1964-1965 – Travels to Ibiza with girlfriend/artist Valerie Porter. She begins a relationship with Pablo Picasso while there. Introduces Shonberg to Salvador Dali.

1965 – Mounts first-ever exhibition of Psychedelic Art in tandem with painter Isaac Abrams at the CODA Gallery in the East Village (NYC).

1967 – Only solo exhibition of his artwork, "This ARE Burt Shonberg" at Gallery Contemporary at 631 N. La Cienega Blvd, mounted by George Greif.

1969-1976 – Designs album covers for the bands like the Curtis Brothers, Love, and Spirit, the latter of whom the artist befriends via his student and sometimes-patron Marshall Berle. (Berle was managing Spirit and its main songwriter Randy California at the time; later managed Van Halen.)

1977 – Shonberg dies at age 44 in Seal Beach, CA, no descendants.

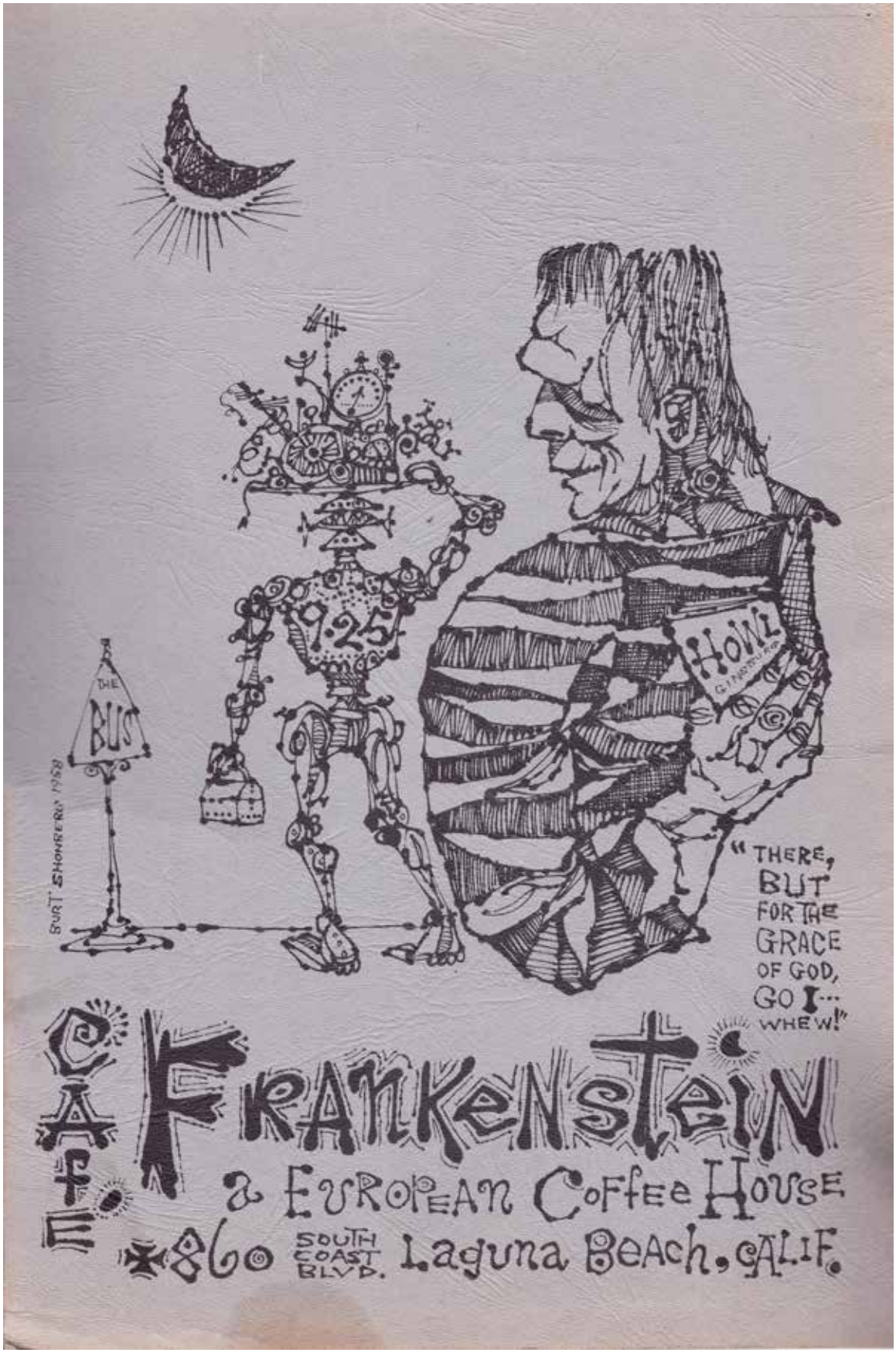
2012 – Artist Wendy All recreates Shonberg's Cafe Frankenstein edifice and murals in a diorama for San Diego ComicFest.

2014 – Marshall Berle produces "Out Here: A Film About Burt Shonberg."

2015 – "L.A. Weekly" publishes Brian Chidester's article "In Search of Burt Shonberg's Lost 1960s Psychedelic Art" (first major article on the artist's life and oeuvre).

2017 – Mandrake of Oxford publishes the biography "Out There: The Transcendent Life and Art of Burt Shonberg" by Spenser Kansa.

2021 – "Beyond the Pleasuredome: The Lost Occult World of Burt Shonberg" exhibition—curated by Chidester, produced by the Stephen Romano Gallery, mounted Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick, Cleveland, OH—is first exhibition of Shonberg art in 54 years.



Cafe Frankenstein menu, illustrated by Burt Shonberg, c. 1959.

Cafe Frankenstein (exterior), Laguna Beach, CA, May 1961 (photo by Doris I. Walker)

Contributors

Steven Intermill is the director of the Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick: the only brick and mortar museum in the United States dedicated to sharing artifacts of the occult. When not exploring the mysteries, he spends time with his spouse, Jillian, and his cats, Berti and Robat.

Robert Cozzolino is Patrick and Aimee Butler Curator of Paintings at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. He has been called the "curator of the dispossessed" for championing underrepresented artists and uncommon perspectives on well-known artists. He has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art" (2021-22), "World War I and American Art" (2016-17), "David Lynch: The Unified Field" (2014-15) and "The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World" (2012).

Roger William Corman (b. April 5, 1926) is an American film director, producer, and actor. He has been called "The Pope of Pop Cinema" and is known as a trailblazer in the world of independent film. Many of Corman's films are based on works that have an already-established critical reputation, such as his cycle of cult films adapted from the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. Corman mentored and gave a start to many young film directors, including Francis Ford Coppola, Ron Howard, Martin Scorsese, Jonathan Demme, and James Cameron, and was highly influential in the New Hollywood filmmaking movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He also helped to launch the careers of actors like Peter Fonda, Jack Nicholson, Dennis Hopper, Bruce Dern, Sylvester Stallone, Diane Ladd, and William Shatner.

Brian Chidester is an art historian, author, critic, and documentary filmmaker. He is a regular contributor to such publications as "The American Prospect," "The Atlantic," "L.A. Weekly," "Paste," and "The Village Voice." He is also the author of "Pop Surf Culture" (Santa Monica Press, 2008) and the forthcoming "Out of My Head: The Imaginary Creatures of Josep Baqué" (Norton/Fantagraphics), and an essayist of six artist monograms. Chidester has curated such exhibitions as "One Day You'll See: A History of Afrofuturism" and "Celluloid Babylon: The Visionary Photographs of William Mortensen in the Silent Film Era," and has directed and/or produced documentaries for BBC, PBS, Showtime, and the Carl Wilson Foundation. He received his Master's in Art History from Brooklyn College and currently lives in New York City.

John Winer is an award-winning corporate and indie filmmaker. His nonprofit, Candlewood Media Collective, is producing "reimagiNATION," a feature-length documentary examining the living legacy of the hippie and counterculture movements of the 1960s. Winer's industrial film base includes performing arts, travel, educational, summer camp, and corporate clients. He spent the early part of his career in broadcasting, advertising, and marketing, including stints at Foote, Cone & Belding, an advertising agency headquartered in Chicago, and CBS Television in New York City.

Stephen Romano is a collector, curator, and private art dealer in Brooklyn, NY. His Stephen Romano Gallery has collaborated with many cultural institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Reina Sophia in Madrid, Gagosian Gallery in New York, the Dark Mofo Festival in Tasmania, Morbid Anatomy at Greenwood Cemetery, the American Folk Art Museum in New York, and the Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick in Cleveland. Romano has published several catalogs and essays by some of the most engaging and provocative writers of our time (including the late Thomas McEvilley). Romano's exhibitions have received widespread critical acclaim, his exhibitions and curation having been covered in the "New York Times" and many other publications. He is the primary representative for the art of Charles Dellschau, William Mortensen, Burt Shonberg, and the North American presentation of the art of Wolfgang Grässe and Darcilio Lima. (See www.romanoart.com)

Acknowledgements

This exhibition and catalog are dedicated to the life and art of Burt Shonberg (1933-1977). His works are sacred, vision quest, shaman prayer objects by a modern day healer, sorcerer, and medicine man; a true witch who had knowledge, will, courage, and silence. Thanks for leaving us with an oeuvre of luminous content that calls for the use of our extended powers of perception. With our efforts we hope to put your integrity as an artist where it belongs —in the forefront.

Thank you to the descendents of George Clayton Johnson—Paul Johnson and Judy Olive—for entrusting us with the collection that Shonberg gave to your father and that he left to you. Equally, thank you for giving us the opportunity to become a chapter in their ever bewildering odyssey. We will do our best to honor George by ensuring his place in work's provenance.

The Stephen Romano Gallery would like to thank John Winer for your belief in our ability to help perpetuate Shonberg's legacy.

Thank you to curator Brian Chidester for introducing me personally to Shonberg's art and for your eloquent essay. It is through you, in our very first encounter, that I learned of him, only to realize in the years to come that this was the artist whose works impacted me so greatly at an early age, and was the genesis of my esoteric sensibilities, which have matured over my lifetime.

Thank you to Roger Corman for your overwhelming generosity of spirit and wonderful memoir on Shonberg. You have been a heroic figure to me since I was 10, when I first saw "The House of Usher," and was impacted by the psychological and emotional power art can bring to storytelling, something which has remained with me for a lifetime. Thank you to Hampton Fancher for your contributions as well.

Thank you to Marshall Berle for your altruistic benevolence in sharing with me your first hand memories of Shonberg—the man and the artist. I am particularly grateful for the excerpts from "Out There: A Brief Account of How This All Began for Me" which appear courtesy of you, as well as all of the photographic and documentary resources you have given us access to. Most of all, thank you for being a friend and supporter to Shonberg in his lifetime.

Thank you to Robert Cozzolino for your amazing introduction for this catalog. Your advocacy of the many artists who are detached from the mainstream is greatly admired and your endorsement of Shonberg's art magnifies it by orders of magnitude.

Thank you Steven Intermill, director of the Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick, for giving us an exciting venue in which to present Shonberg's works for the first time in more than 50 years, and for the platform to publish this catalog. Also thank you to Jillian Slane and Toni Rotonda.

Thank you also to Cynthia Brown for your ever-enduring reassurances and vigilance. And thank you to Phil Allocco for helping find my way to New Horizons.

Additionally, I would like to thank all of our patrons and supporters, including Dr. Kevin J. O'Rourke, Eric Brecher, James Brett, Monty Blanchard, Jemma Foster, Tom Isenberg, Borislav Martinov, Matthew Bede Murphy, and thank you Morbid Anatomy.

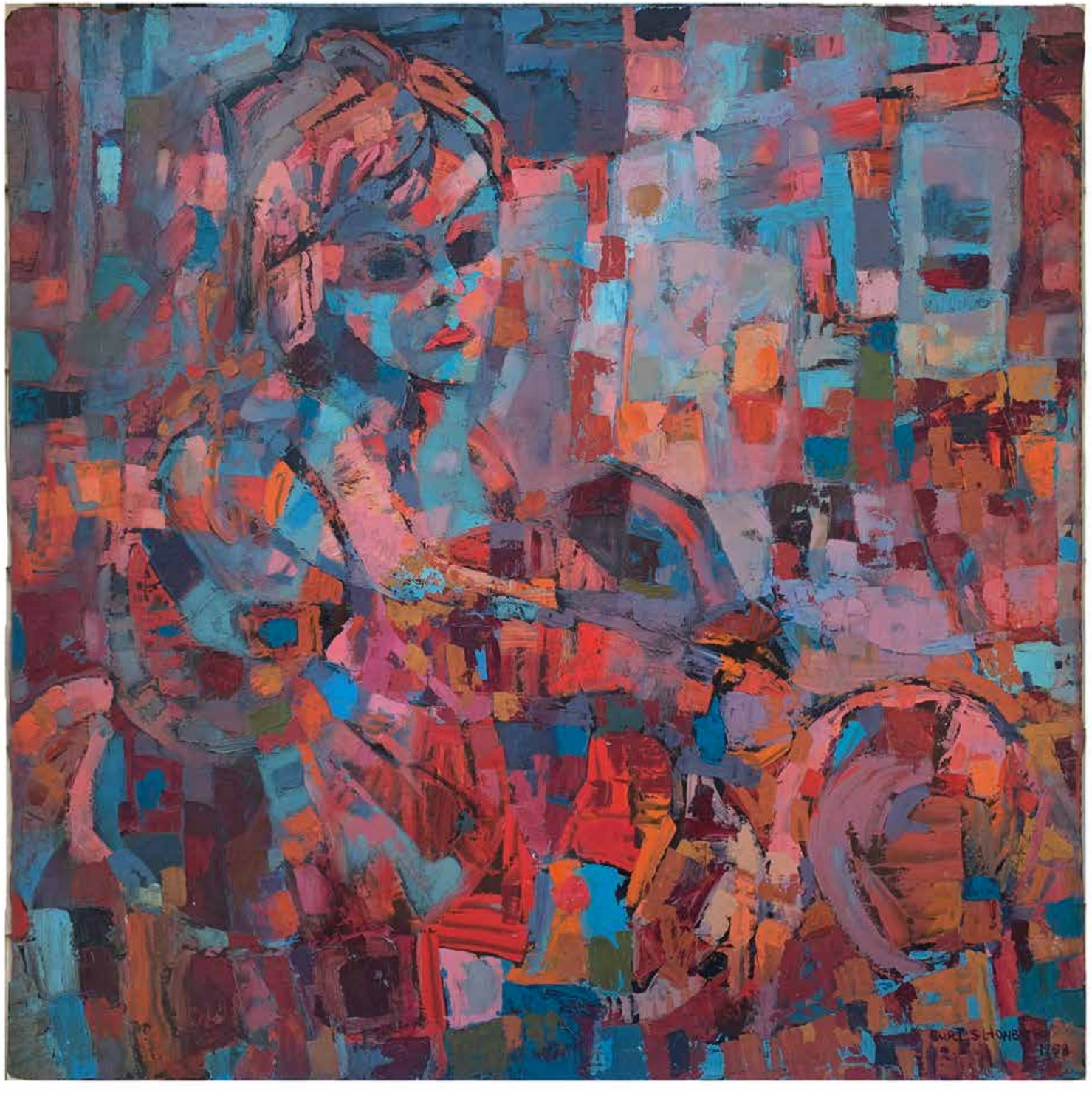
Thank you finally to my family, Amber, Anika, Jordan, Phemie, and last but not least, my beloved soulmate of almost 20 years, the magnificent Amie Romano.

Stephen Romano,
Exhibition Producer,
August 2021

“Title Unknown” (c. 1958-1962), casein on panel, 29 x 30 ½”

“Title Unknown” (1959), casein on panel, 20” x 16”

“Edith” (1958), casein on panel, 46” x 46”



“Title Unknown (Scarlet Woman 1)” (1959), casein on panel, 24” x 18”

MY FRIEND GEORGE
KURT CHOMBERG 10/65

“Title Unknown (Sphinx 1)” (1959), casein on panel, 26” x 12”

“Title Unknown” (1960), casein on panel, 37” x 31”

BURT SHONBERG 1960

“Title Unknown (Sphinx 2)” (c. 1958-1961), casein on panel, 32” x 50”

“Title Unknown” (c. 1960-1961), casein on panel, 49 ½” x 37 ½”

“Title Unknown (Magic Landscape: Lucifer in the Garden)” (1961), casein on panel, 49 ½” x 37 ½”

“As two artists moving into new modes of expression in our work, our introduction was fortuitous. His preoccupation with monsters, aliens, the occult, and other horror elements in his art resonated with me. Most importantly, I could see he was a major talent exploring new ground in form and color. I knew right away that Burt’s artistic sensibilities would lend much to my new film.”

—Roger Corman, director of “The House of Usher” and “The Premature Burial” (which featured the art of Burt Shonberg)

“Wish I could offer up a decisive comment, but it was such a special time and he was such a unique and special person, and what he did was so far out, it deserves more than I have the time to do justice to.”

—Hampton Fancher, screenwriter “Blade Runner” and “Blade Runner 2049”

“Burt Shonberg was more than just an artist, he was a 'prospector of consciousness' who traveled to areas outside of our collective awareness and painted what he saw during those excursions.”

—Marshall Berle, former manager of Spirit and Van Halen, and director/producer of “Out Here: A Film About Burt Shonberg”

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